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ABSTRACT

The Institute for Research on Teaching, a major center funded by the National Institute of Education, has as its central mission the determination of the mental life and decision-making processes of teachers, with particular reference to the teaching of reading. The Teachers' Conceptions of Reading Project, part of the Institute, is exploring research techniques and conducting studies on the views, beliefs, and knowledge of practicing classroom teachers, with respect to reading and the teaching and learning of reading. This paper reports on the project's research: (1) a content analysis of books on reading authored by teachers and teacher educators, (2) a review of the research literature for 1965-1976 on teachers' concerns and conceptions of reading and the teaching of reading, and (3) four research techniques that permit teachers to reveal their conceptions of reading without prejudice from the instruments serving to elicit those views. (Author)

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1977 AERA Symposium Presentation

The TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF READING Project

Institute for Research on Teaching

Julia S. Falk*

Introduction

The original primary focus of the Institute for Research on Teaching was that "teaching is a form of clinical work -- a process involving diagnostic and prescriptive judgments directed at the enhancement of pupil learning and development."[1] The focus developed, in part, because of previous experience in the study of physicians' decision-making by Lee Shulman, Arthur Elstein, and several other current IRT members. While the concepts of diagnosis and prescription are clearly appropriate to certain aspects of teaching in particular situations -- as illustrated by the work discussed at this symposium by John Vinsonhaler and Lois Bader -- there are limits in the extent to which these concepts can be extended to teaching. Teaching is more broadly based than specialized assistance to children who have (or are suspected of having) reading problems.

For many people, diagnosis and prescription presuppose several crucial factors that do not always exist in the average elementary school classroom with respect to reading, the teaching of reading, and the learning of reading. Among these presuppositions are the following: (1) that teachers possess sufficiently rich and clear conceptions of reading on which to base a diagnosis and recommend a prescription, (2) that teachers are sufficiently free from school system control to actually make diagnoses and prescriptions (rather than being forced into a lock-step procedure utilizing fully structured materials

CS 003 272

according to some externally imposed method), and (3) that students learning to read are in a general state of "illness" -- with most children requiring some type of diagnosis and prescription on a regular basis during the school year.

Each of these presuppositions is open to question and, therefore, provides an important research topic. Within the IRT, the Teachers' Conceptions of Reading Project is exploring the first issue, while another project -- Institutional, Parent, and Community Variables -- is concerned, in part, with the second. The third issue, dealing with the learning of reading, is more appropriately addressed by the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, although many researchers within the IRT have argued that the concepts of diagnosis and prescription are inappropriate for most children, who do learn to read without the major problems that usually lead their teachers to refer them to a reading specialist or a reading clinician.

In order to make decisions (whether diagnostic and prescriptive or otherwise), teachers must possess opinions, views, and some degree of knowledge about the reading process and the teaching of reading; in other words, teachers must have conceptions of what reading is. To determine what these conceptions are is the focus of the IRT research project on Teachers' Conceptions of Reading.

Most previous research on the teaching of reading has fallen into one of two categories: comparative studies on the effectiveness of various teaching methods or observational studies of teachers' classroom behaviors. The comparative methods studies have been largely inconclusive and/or contradictory, but, more importantly, they tend to ignore the teacher, what the teacher knows, and even what the teacher does. The second type of study also fails to determine teachers' knowledge and bases for decision-making. It focuses instead on such

observable matters as task time allocation, frequency of teacher talk, and other classroom management behaviors. Both kinds of studies can be concluded by an analysis of student outcome in terms of performance on standard reading tests, but the fact remains that from such studies we do not learn much about the mental life and decision-making processes of teachers.

It is likely that the judgments made and the actions taken by teachers in the teaching of reading are in some measure conditioned by what it is that they think they are trying to effect. Teachers must have some sense of what constitutes the process of reading that they are trying to develop in children. They must have some basis for deciding whether a child is a good and successful reader or a problem reader. It is precisely such concepts that we attempt to reveal to prospective teachers in our teacher education institutions.

We do not expect all teachers to share a common conception of reading. Nor do we expect that teachers' conceptions of reading will necessarily be direct reflections of the various views of reading held by the theorists and authorities who author books and provide instruction in teacher education programs. There are numerous views among the "experts" on all aspects of reading and the teaching of reading. It is dangerous to attempt to categorize or label these divergent positions, but, as an example, we can cite the skills development position as contrasted with the holistic view, or the position that emphasizes decoding from print to sound as compared to the position that emphasizes comprehension. Teachers who received their own education under one or another of these views may well differ from teachers educated in a different perspective. Furthermore, reading theories might lead us to expect a simple dimensionality in the ways teachers think about reading, but in fact our preliminary work indicates that teachers' actual views of reading

are more complex, reflecting a range of influences beyond their official training -- influences such as particular classroom experiences, teacher personality, school district demographic characteristics, school system regulations, etc.

There are many potential consequences that result from particular conceptions of reading. If a decoding view of reading dominates those responsible for constructing a state pupil assessment test in reading, the test will be substantially different from an assessment instrument prepared by authorities who emphasize comprehension in reading. Such tests have consequences for teachers -- the materials they select, the methods they use, the pupils whom they identify as good or poor readers. Similar consequences emerge from a teacher's own conceptions of reading. In addition to basic materials and methods selection, particular conceptions of reading will affect the ways in which a teacher groups children for reading instruction (or whether the teacher groups children at all), time allocated to workbooks and reading materials, time spent with different children, attitudes and expectations -- in fact, all aspects of the teacher's interaction with the pupil in the course of reading instruction. An understanding of teachers' conceptions of reading is crucially important to an understanding of teachers, their actions and decisions, and the environment in which they function.

The Research

The initial research conducted by the Teachers' Conceptions of Reading Project involved traditional modes of literature investigation. Two studies have been completed: A content analysis of books on reading authored by teachers[2] and well-known, widely-used books on methods of teaching reading.[3] This work

was carried out by senior researcher Julia Falk, Project research interns Mavis Donahue and Joel Van Roekel, research assistant Catherine Woodland, and Annette Weinshank, a practicing teacher and school reading specialist. Approximately 300 propositions, basic assumptions, and key principles were elicited from the books analyzed. These were categorized under the following headings: nature of the reading act, goals of reading, teachers' role, affect, relationship between oral and written language, instructional approaches, materials utilization, problem-causing factors, teacher response to pupil error, individualization and grouping, and evaluation of pupil performance. While Donahue and Falk have not completed the statistical analysis, there is apparently a tendency for the teacher-authored works to focus on the fundamental issues involving conceptions of reading, teaching, and learning, while the methods books, authored by teacher educators, tend to be focused on the practical issues of classroom management, materials utilization, grouping, etc.

The propositions obtained through the content analysis will serve two purposes: (1) a formal analysis of the similarities and differences in types of concerns of teachers and teacher-educators will be prepared based on these propositions, and (2) the propositions will serve as one basis for the development of instruments to be used in studying the conceptions of reading held by a sample of practicing classroom teachers in the state of Michigan.

(2) The second preliminary study carried out within the Teachers' Conceptions of Reading Project is a review of the research literature for 1965-1976 on teachers' concerns and conceptions of reading and the teaching of reading. This work was conducted jointly by two of the Project research interns, Gabriella Belli and Ann Reiser, and by senior researcher Gaston Blom. 228 promising references and citations were obtained and reviewed, but only 59 of

these related directly or, more often, indirectly to studies of the concerns and conceptions of teachers about reading and the teaching of reading. The final report surveys the relevant studies, offers an analysis of the research scene, and provides recommendations for future research directions; this report will be made generally available by the IRT. The 59 studies are categorized into eight classifications: general references, reading habits of teachers, teacher-identified problems and concerns, teacher education, teacher attitudes, instructional approaches, teachers' knowledge and reading ability, and children's conceptions of reading.

Belli, Blom, and Reiser offer a number of conclusions on the available research into all eight of these topics. Those conclusions directly relevant to our concern with teachers' conceptions of reading, however, are limited by the paucity of existing studies which directly focus on the teacher and his/her conceptions of reading and the teaching of reading. The three studies that come closest to exploring this topic are aimed specifically at teachers' reports of their major problems in classroom instruction.[4] In each case, Belli, Blom, and Reiser conclude that teachers' conceptions of reading are primarily at the functional stage. Teachers' comments in these studies deal mostly with daily problems rather than focusing on general issues and characteristics of reading and the reading process. Of course, the studies from which this conclusion is drawn were directed toward uncovering precisely such practical, functional concerns, and, therefore, we cannot determine whether this practical concern constitutes all of teachers' conceptions of reading. It may well be that teachers do have underlying conceptions of what reading is, that they have arrived at an understanding of the reading process, and that they possess sufficient information about reading and the teaching of reading to reach professional, motivated decisions in their classroom behavior. None of the

research reviewed by Belli, Blom, and Reiser provides conclusive evidence on these issues.

The practical focus of teachers' concerns, as revealed by the research survey, corresponds generally with the emphasis on pragmatic issues found in the methods books studied by content analysis; however, the teacher-authored books subjected to content analysis displayed far greater concern with conceptual issues such as the nature of the reading act, the relationship between spoken and written language, and the roles of the child and the teacher with respect to classroom reading activities.

The conclusions reached by the Teachers' Conceptions of Reading Project, based on these two preliminary studies, are (1) previous research on teachers' concerns and conceptions of reading has focused on practical aspects of methods, materials, and classroom management issues, (2) prominent teachers who have authored successful books on the teaching of reading consistently display knowledge and concern regarding more fundamental, even theoretical, aspects of reading and the teaching of reading, and (3) there has been almost no research into the general conceptions about reading held by typical classroom teachers, yet whatever these conceptions may be, they constitute an important basis for the decisions that practicing teachers make as they teach reading.

As a result of these conclusions, the Project is currently undertaking several distinct, yet interrelated studies to explore the views and conceptions of reading held by practicing classroom teachers.

One of the main research concerns in exploring mental phenomena -- such as views, beliefs, and conceptions -- is the development of techniques which permit the subjects under study to reveal their own views without prejudice from the instrument serving to elicit those views. Three approaches are under investigation

by the Project staff.

(1) Senior researcher Gerald Duffy, research interns Ann Reiser and Joel VanRoekel, and graduate student Michelle Johnston have developed a variation of George Kelly's Role Concept Repertory Test (Rep Test); this variation makes explicit the implicit conceptions of reading held by classroom teachers. In their procedure, teachers are asked to sort and categorize their own pupils according to specific questions posed by an interviewer. Questions such as the following are asked:

> Who is the best reader in your class? Why? Who is the worst reader in your class? Why? Pick out two pupils who, in your opinion, are not making satisfactory progress. Why do you think they are not making satisfactory progress? If you had the money or resources or "administrative pull" to get anything you needed to help these pupils, what is it that you would get? Why do you think they would profit from this?

The main advantage of such a Rep Test is that it places the eliciting questions in a context with which the teacher is fully familiar and in which he/she has been working. The Rep Test allows the teacher, within the limits of the questions asked by the researcher, to present his/her own concepts without specific wording being imposed by the interviewer or the instrument. The major research problem with a Rep Test is the inadequacy of "scoring" procedures. An enormous amount of data can be generated, but analyzing that data systematically remains a problem of (as yet) unknown proportions. However, the explanations that the subjects provide in the course of the Rep Test will serve as one source of potential items for a Likert-scale presentation of propositions to be incorporated into a written questionnaire designed for use with a larger sample of teachers.

(2) Senior researcher Alan Hollingsworth, assisted by a research team from the Department of English, has prepared an interview-questionnaire designed to

elicit teachers' own wording for technique, methods, and strategies for improving pupils' reading and for evaluating growth of student reading ability. Open-ended questions are embedded within a questionnaire containing a number of check-list items and yes/no response questions, most of which are noncontroversial and phrased in ordinary, nontechnical language. The embedding of significant questions among others of lesser concern reduces the anxiety of the subjects, while at the same time providing a neutral context. Teachers' responses to the open-ended questions will provide the research Project with statements made by practicing teachers; these statements will then serve as another basis for the written questionnaire suitable for administration to a large sample of teachers.

(3) Gabriella Belli and Gaston Blom are exploring an interview technique based partly on Blom's professional training and experience as a psychiatrist. The interview format is designed to elicit personal conceptions about teaching in general and the teaching of reading in particular. A major emphasis is placed on the sources of these conceptions -- what does the teacher see as the major influences on his/her beliefs and how are these beliefs modified in actual classroom practice by external factors? This interview technique provides a shortened clinical study with the interviewer functioning in a non-threatening role as a participant-observer in the subject's attempt to articulate his/her conceptions on teaching, teaching reading, and reading itself.

All three of these projects have just completed their pilot phase; the instruments should be revised and ready for use by April 30.

Other members of the Project staff are engaged in exploring different aspects of teachers' knowledge and conceptions of reading. Senior researchers Wayne Otto and Jay Samuels are attempting to develop a written test of teachers' knowledge of research findings on the reading process and of the major principles

of several widely promulgated methods of teaching reading; this work is still at the developmental stage.

Research intern Mavis Donahue has developed a 45 item paired-comparison instrument on the nature of reading; the instrument presents pairs of statements describing "reading" activities (e.g., "reading" a newspaper headline, "reading" a list of nonsense words) and subjects are asked to select the activity which is closest to their own understanding of what reading is. Donahue's project has been piloc tested and the instrument appears to discriminate three types of conceptions, based on the decoding-to-meaning dimension and on the presence or absence of print. One group of respondents consistently selected meaning-related activities, while another group consistently selected activities that could be expressed orally (even in the absence of meaning); the third set of respondents appeared to disregard this meaning/decoding dimension and instead insisted on the presence of print. The subjects for this pilot study were "laymen" with respect to the teaching of reading; they were neither teachers nor education majors but rather a sample of university students from a wide variety of disciplines ranging from freshmen to doctoral students. Continued piloting is planned in order to determine the conceptual validity of the instrument and the response patterns that characterize teachers.

Conclusion

The main focus of the Teachers' Conceptions of Reading Project at the Institute for Research on Teaching is the study of the views, beliefs, and knowledge of practicing classroom teachers with respect to reading, the teaching of reading, and the learning of reading. In order to explore teachers' conceptions, a variety of research techniques are employed -- all of which are

designed to elicit teachers' views without bias introduced by the sampling instruments. The data gathered on teachers' conceptions will be correlated, during a later phase of the Project, with teachers' classroom activities and behaviors and with measures of pupil achievement in the acquisition of reading. In addition to providing increased understanding of teachers' knowledge, concepts, and decison making, the results of this research will have specific consequences for programs in teacher education at both the pre-service and the in-service levels.

Notes

* The author is a senior researcher at the Institute for Research on Teaching, coordinator of the Teachers' Conceptions of Reading Project, and associate professor of linguistics at Michigan State University.

1 Institute for Research on Teaching: Technical Proposal, p. A-2.

2 Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Teacher, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963; Daniel N. Fader and Elton B. McNeil, Hooked on Books, New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1968; John Holt, How Children Learn, New York: Pitman Publishing, 1967; Herbert Kohl, Reading, How To, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973.

3 Albert Harris and Edward Sipay, How to Increase Reading Ability, 6th ed., New York: David McKay Company, 1975; George Spache and Evelyn Spache, Reading in Elementary School, 3rd ed., Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1973; Russell G. Stauffer, Teaching Reading as a Thinking Process, New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

4 James Flood and Stanley Zehm, "Instructional Needs of Reading Teachers in the Primary Grades," Reading Improvement 12:51-55 (Spring 1975): Marilyn Lichtman, "Problems and Remedies: A Viewpoint from the Field," The Reading Teacher 27:39-32 (October 1973); Delwyn G. Schubert, "My Greatest Problem in Teaching Reading," Elementary English 48:230-232 (1971).